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ABSTRACT

It is generally well accepted in the adult literature that the quality of friendships correlates well with loneliness and the number of friends one has does not. This study investigated children's self-reports of quantity and quality of friendships as predictors of loneliness. Subjects (N=64) were third, fourth, and fifth-grade students enrolled in a university laboratory school. Each subject was asked to complete the Children's Loneliness Questionnaire and social relationships questionnaire. Subjects could identify as many as nine friends in each of three categories: In Class, In Another Class, and Outside of School. Additionally, subjects circled numbers from 1 to 5 to indicate how satisfying the relationship was. The results indicated that the children had a high rate of agreement in self-reporting of friendships. Quality of Friends in Another Class was the sole significant predictor of loneliness. This variable alone accounted for 25% of the variance of children's self-reports of social dissatisfaction. This school was based on humanistic theory. In this school teachers reported that they teach children acceptance of classmates and across grades. These factors may account for the inability of quantity of friends to predict loneliness scores for these children. Even though as a group children self-reported large number of friends, the incidence of loneliness was as high in this group as it was in other samples of children. (ABL)

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Predicting Children's Loneliness: Quantity and Quality of Friendships

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Abstract

Numbers of self-reported friends accounted for 22% of the variance in children's loneliness scores in a sample of 365 fifth- and sixth-graders (Iverson, 1991). Quality of relationships has not been investigated. The present study used multiple regression procedures to analyze the ability of quantity and quality of self-reported friendships to predict self-reported loneliness in a sample of 64 third- through sixth-grade students. The quality rating was the only significant predictor of loneliness, accounting for 22% of the variance in the loneliness scores. Implications are discussed and directions for future research are suggested.

Predicting Children's Loneliness:
Quantity and Quality of Friendships

It is generally well accepted in the adult literature that quality of friendships correlates well with loneliness and the number of friends one has does not (Williams & Solano, 1983). Thus, adult loneliness is most often characterized by insufficient quality and depth of one's social relationships (Marangoni & Ickes, 1989) and has been linked to depression, alcoholism, suicide, and physical illness (Peplau, Russel, & Heim, 1979). What is known about loneliness is based largely on studies of adults; little is known about children's loneliness in terms of prevalence or correlates.

The literature that does exist on children's social satisfaction suggests that 10-15 percent of all students report significant feelings of loneliness (Asher & Wheeler, 1985; Iverson, 1991). Because academic pursuit takes place in a social context, it has been suggested that dissatisfaction with social relationships might undermine academic progress at the very least (Good & Weinstein, 1986).

Asher and Wheeler (1985) have shown that children who are rejected by their peers are significantly more lonely than those who are rated as popular, average, or neglected. Iverson (1991) investigated peer status nominations and self-reported numbers of friends as predictors of loneliness for 365 fifth- and sixth-graders. Fourteen percent of this sample reported loneliness beyond one standard deviation from the group mean on the Children's Loneliness Questionnaire (Asher &

Wheeler, 1985). Total numbers of friends (p=.001), friends in class (p=.003), and friends in another class (p=.033) accounted for 22% of the variance in loneliness scores and peer status (p=.000) accounted for an additional 13%. In a separate sample of 103 fifth- and sixth-graders, quantity of friends accounted for 14% of the variance in loneliness scores (p=.002) (Iverson, 1991). It appears that unlike adults, number of friends is a significant predictor of loneliness. How friendship quality links to loneliness is largely unknown.

The present study investigated children's self-reports of quantity and quality of friendships as predictors of loneliness.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 64 third, fourth, and fifth-grade students enrolled in a university laboratory school in the midwest. Parents had given informed consent for their child(ren) to participate.

Procedure

Questionnaire data were gathered in the first class of the day during the last ten days of school. Each subject was asked to complete the Children's Loneliness Questionnaire and a social relationships questionnaire. Subjects could identify as many as nine friends in each of three categories: In Class, In Another Class, and Outside of School (choices of family and relatives were given as examples). Additionally, subjects circled numbers from 1 to 5 to indicate how satisfying the relationship was. The questionnaires were administered in

counterbalanced order in each classroom group setting by two trained females using a set of standard instructions.

Quantity friendship scores were calculated by totaling the number of self-reported friends in each category and summing across categories for the Total Friendship scores. Quality friendship scores represent averages which were calculated by dividing the total number of friends in each category by the sum of the quality ratings in each category.

Results/Discussion

The mean loneliness score for the group was 33 and the standard deviation was 14. Sixteen percent of the subjects reported feelings of social dissatisfaction greater than one standard deviation from the mean. This is similar to prior reports of the incidence of loneliness among children.

Children's reports of Friends in Class were analyzed for reciprocity, (e.g., If John chose Bill, did Bill also choose John?). These results agree with previous findings by Iverson (1990) that children have a high rate of agreement when self-reporting friendships.

Correlations were examined among the variables: Friends in Class, Friends in Another Class, Friends Outside of School, Total Friends, Quality of Friends in Class, Quality of Friends in Another Class, Quality of Friends Outside of School, Total Quality, and Loneliness. Those variables with low intercorrelations were selected for multiple regression analyses.

Quality of Friends in Another Class was the sole significant predictor of loneliness (p=.000). This variable alone accounted for 25% of the variance in children's self-reports of social dissatisfaction.

The subjects that composed the sample for this analysis attended a school which purported to base its philosophy of education, curriculum, instruction, and classroom management on humanistic theory. Teachers reported that they teach children acceptance of differences in others and stress friendship development among all classmates and across grades. These factors may account for the inability of quantity of friends to predict loneliness scores for this sample of children. These factors may also be responsible for the inability of some of the different categories of quality of friendships to predict loneliness; quality of friendships in another class may have been "distanced" enough for children to report their own perceptions.

It is hypothesized that these children were "trained" in a humanistic school system to give socially desirable responses to questions about friendships, i.e. Everybody is my friend and I am everybody's friend and I am satisfied with those friendships. Interestingly, even though as a group children self-reported large numbers of friends, the incidence of loneliness was as high in this group as it was in other samples of children. Perhaps these children, like adults, have become more aware of and influenced by social acceptability. At the very least, the results of this study suggest that even when children, as a group, list many friends there are as many

significantly lonely children as in groups of children where numbers of friends vary.

Descriptors of children's loneliness are needed in order to develop appropriate interventions that promote feelings of social satisfaction. Quantity and quality of children's friendships and peer status nominations should be investigated in a variety of schools (e.g., those with behavioral orientations) to see if these multiple variables enhance prediction of loneliness.

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